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ABSTRACT

Script reform, the modification of an existing writing system, is often confused with script replacement of one writing system with another. Turkish underwent the replacement of Arabic script by an adaptation of Roman script under Kamel Ataturk, but a similar replacement in Persian was rejected because of the high rate of existing literacy in Persian. An alphabetic script could not reproduce the historical, psychological, cultural, and representational significance of Chinese characters. Conventions of transcription vary from country to country and do not foster consistency in application of the Roman alphabet. Script reform, by contrast, includes partial changes involving (1) differences in letter or character shape, (2) alternatives to existing characters or letters, (3) fundamental alterations in the written system's typology, and (4) adaptations to a new writing medium. Script reform in Japanese involved a long process for the simplification of kanji use and the use of syllabaries. In Tamil, a syllabic script, reforms proposed by Beschi included application of European conventions of punctuation and word spacing, changes in the shape of vowel conjuncts, introducing a new shape to represent long vowels and make the distinction of long and short vowels clearer, and reintroduction of a dot placed over a consonant to represent a closed syllable or a geminate. However, additional reform suggestions have met with political controversy. (MSE)

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Script reforms - are they necessary?

Talk given at the May, 1985 meeting of the Hong Kong Association of Applied Linguistics

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With just fifty-seven working days to go before the shackles are loosened and the nightmare is nearly over, you may be assured that my emotions are of euphoric relief tinged with regret - not at leaving, but at having come. I can say no more now, but I shall do so from beyond the prison walls just as soon as my lungs are again allowed to breathe the air of freedom - and once all the money is banked! I don't want at this moment to spoil your reading pleasure in the more scurrilous E.F.L. publications over the next few months!

When it was suggested to me that my swan-song should take the form of a talk to H.A.A.L., I chose what I thought would be a fairly uncontroversial topic as far as my temporary paymasters are concerned, and one which the blue pencil could not conceivably wish to hover long over. But it was not to be. The very week that I submitted my subject to the Chairman in response to his invitation to me to offer once again a contribution to the H.A.A.L. series, it was announced that the Hong Kong Government is taking active steps to look into the matter of Chinese script reform here in Hong Kong. The political

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nature of the question, therefore, precludes my discussing it in public or, indeed, anywhere in Hong Kong where there are any walls. So I am confined to platitudinous remarks on the problems of script reforms in general. Any generalisations that may be applied to the case of Chinese cannot and should not, in that case, be attributed directly to specific statements by me.

I think it is necessary to clarify exactly what is meant by script reform. When I mentioned to some colleagues that I was going to address this topic, one person said to me, "Oh, you could mention the case of Turkey and the westernisation policies of Kemal Atatürk." Another said, "Don't forget to mention Pinyin." Whilst, in the literature, these examples may be cited as instances of script *reform*, they are, of course, cases of script *replacement* and not reform at all. The term *reform* seems regularly to be used when a Roman script replaces a local script, but not, generally, in the case of a non-Roman script replacing another non-Roman script, as, for example, in the case of the Arabic script being imposed on Persian, Spanish or Tamil. *Reform*, when it is used in such cases, is an occidentally ethnocentric term and tends rather arrogantly to assume the superiority of the Roman (or, at least, an alphabetic) writing system. If a non-alphabetic script is replaced by an alphabetic, the former is said to be *reformed*, and the sense is positive. Other cases of script replacement tend to be considered negatively, if not merely unworthy of consideration. If we are to discuss script reform in any technical sense, our thoughts should not be clouded by the various abuses that have been made of the term. Firstly, then, to resolve some of the ambiguity of terminology, I shall try to explain what I think script reform is *not*; then I shall say what I think it should refer to, and illustrate this with examples from Japanese and Tamil, of which I have made a particular study - in my spare time, be assured. I shall leave any comments on parallels with character reform to those of you infinitely more familiar than I am with the situation obtaining in Chinese, and freer than I am to discuss them in public.

Firstly, then, script reform is not script replacement. If the necessity is perceived to replace an existing writing system with another, then those who are responsible for the transition evidently consider the replaced script to be less advantageous in some way than the replacement. The perceived advantages may, of course, be totally unrelated to any linguistic criteria and completely one-sided, for it is obvious that complete replacement of one writing system by another will render a greater or smaller part of the literate population immediately illiterate. Kemal Atatürk was, in the 1920s, able to carry through the replacement of the Arabic script used for Turkish by an adapted form of the Roman script precisely because the illiteracy rate was so high in Turkey at the time. The majority of educated Turks could already read the Roman script anyway, having learnt French (or, in a few cases, English or German). The great campaigns that were taken to the villages and remote areas to teach the people the new script were not entirely script conversion campaigns, they were, for the most part, basic literacy campaigns, where none had existed before. People were being taught to read and write. It did not matter really which script was being used, and for political reasons, and identification with the West rather than the East, the Roman script was adopted. When, some after, Reza Shah proposed a similar script replacement in Persia, he was opposed by his most ardent supporters, the clergy, on religious grounds. Not wishing to undermine his position by a confrontation with his powerbase within the country, he did not pursue the plan. When his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, the last Shah of Persia, made a similar suggestion some thirty years later, the arguments put forward were less on religious grounds - he would not have tolerated opposition from the clergy on such matters in any case, and recent history has eloquently demonstrated the results of his policies in this regard - but more on the grounds that the literacy rate had grown to such proportions as to render any script replacement a very impolitic move: too many educated, middle-class people would suddenly have become illiterate in their own homes. And

Mohammad Reza Shah could not risk a confrontation with *his* powerbase in the country. Moreover, their reactions would have fuelled clerical opposition, which the Shah needed, in spite of himself, to avoid provoking further than he already had. The plan was dropped. What was conveniently forgotten - though not by the Shah, who was very conscious of the pre-Islamic history of Persia, and even changed the calendar to reflect its 2,500 years of monarchy - was that further back in history, the Arabs had imposed their script upon their conquered peoples for politico-religious reasons, and *not* because these peoples were necessarily illiterate. The Persians, for example, have the longest continuous history of writing in the Middle East; and Susa in southern Iran is the cradle of the development of Western writing systems. But when the Arabs conquered the Persians, they replaced the Persian cuneiform script with the Arabic script. Even the Greeks, who are credited with the development of written vowels and had already had a very long alphabetic tradition, did not manage to replace, or see the reason for replacing the Persians' own script during their period of conquest of the Persian Empire.

The Persians had developed their script to suit their perceived analysis of their language; the Arabic script is eminently unsuitable for the Persian language, just as it is for Spanish, Tamil or Turkish (although the Greek alphabet would indeed have served Persian very well, with one or two adaptations for pronunciation, e.g., /su:s/, from which we get *Susa* and /da:rios/ from which we get *Darius*, were the Greek pronunciations of the Persian /ju:ʃ/ and /da:riu:ʃ/ - Greek had no /ʃ/). But politically the imposition of the new writing system gave the Arab conquerors an advantage over the conquered Persians; moreover the Arabic writing system is very much a symbol of religious affiliation, and as such has a mystical significance which transcends the practicalities of mere writing. There is something of a parallel in the adoption of any form of alphabetic or sound-based system for the transcription of Chinese, be it Pinyin or whatever. An alphabetic script

cannot reproduce visually what a Chinese character does, and cannot, therefore, convey to a reader anything of the symbolic significance that a character conveys. A Chinese character has historical, psychological, cultural and representational significance, which, again, transcends practicality. In societies where the script does have such cultural extra-linguistic significance, calligraphy usually develops as a high art, as it has within both the Arabic and Chinese traditions. Of course, to a Westerner trained in Latin and Greek, the Roman alphabet - and we should not forget that it is the *Roman alphabet*, not the *English alphabet*, as it is often called in countries where English is the second or dominant foreign language - has a special significance, which argues against spelling reform, for example, in English. An archaic or "illogical" spelling can convey precisely something of the permanence of the historical and cultural foundation of the language, in the same way that a character does in Chinese. That this linguistic and cultural background can be perceived in the spelling systems of other Western European languages, from Portuguese to Dutch, is part of the significance that the Roman script has for Europeans. Many such relationships have been obscured by script differences, e.g., in Persian, Dari or most of the languages of northern India which trace their roots to one or other forms of Sanskrit. To replace their scripts of these languages by a Roman script would reveal a surprising degree of linguistic affinity with Western Europe, but at the sacrifice of representation of the very different religious, historical and cultural traditions represented by the Arabic- and Sanskrit- based writing systems used to record these languages.

The major script replacements that have taken place in the world this century which have involved the Roman script, that of Turkish and, as a secondary medium for particular purposes only, Pinyin, have involved languages which do not belong to the Indo-European family, and, in particular to the Graeco-Roman cultural tradition, and which, therefore, cannot claim

the representation of cultural background in their transcriptions that the Roman script and Roman-script-based spelling systems have within Western languages. One indication of this is the choice of Roman script characters that has been made to represent certain sounds in Pinyin - and, indeed in American Indian languages which have been "given" a Roman script by anthropologists or linguists. As far as speakers of English and certain other Western European languages are concerned, there are three "spare" letters on a typewriter, which are used to represent different pronunciations in different languages: *c*, *q* and *x*. Pinyin uses these letters to represent sounds with which they are not usually associated in Western European languages, and this often causes confusion when Europeans try to read Pinyin. I have not been able to determine exactly why the People's Republic of China decided to adopt the spelling it did for Pinyin, and I would welcome enlightenment. I suggest, however, that it may be no coincidence that the one European language that uses the letters *c*, *q* and *x* in a precisely similar way to the way they are used in Pinyin is *Albanian*. And Albanians are the only Europeans who apparently have no problems reading Pinyin *ab initio*! I imagine that somewhere along the line, Albanian linguists must have been involved, as consultants, in the development of the Pinyin system, but I have no direct proof of this, and such speculation may be politically inexpedient nowadays. A further interesting example is the growing practice within China to represent "words" (especially place names) of more than one syllable by series of Roman letters without spaces in Pinyin. The analysis in Pinyin is not character- or morpheme-based, but is word-based, with the concept of what makes a word in Chinese interpreted for a reader by the conventions of spacing in the Roman tradition. There is an unconscious desire to make the representation of the language in the Roman script conform to the principles of transcription obtaining within those languages traditionally written in this script. In Hong Kong, the convention, at least within the Government, is the contrary, where the spacing of Roman script transcription conforms to a

character analysis.

The theoretical determination that both Chinese characters and English spelling unite very diversified pronunciations in a quasi-neutral manner can be seen to constitute only one argument in favour of their preservation, and one which is not always readily appreciated by the layman. Other factors, less "logical" perhaps and more fickle, play a much more significant part in the desire to retain the existing systems than this more general linguistic consideration. Such factors, which may, on the other hand, also be the catalysts for reform or replacement, may be socio-cultural, religious or political; rarely are they strictly pedagogic.

Script reform, in the sense in which I want to use it, is not developmental. By script reform, I do not understand, then, a conscious redesign of letters or characters for particular purposes, such as aesthetic conformity to transient public taste, such as, for example, in calligraphic poster design or the creation of novel type fonts. The adoption of one design of the Roman script, let us say, for signwriting on motorways in the U.K. has been informed by psychological research into reading. The uniformity and selection of the letter shapes on British motorway signs, where lower case is predominant, with the variety of different letter styles used on similar signs in the United States, where upper case is predominant, may serve as a useful comparison. Widespread use of a particular form of a writing system in certain circumstances may lead to its use in other situations unforeseen at its original adoption, but this is not generally accepted as script *reform*. The initial teaching alphabet movement in Britain never succeeded in gaining general acceptance for the i.t.a. as a reform, even for the limited purposes for which it was designed.

Script reform is a *deliberate* attempt, from within or without, to

influence the development of a writing system by the imposition of differences often to the exclusion of pre-existing forms, with the force of authority. These differences may be in the design of letter or character shapes; in the form of preferred alternatives to existing characters or letters; or even fundamental alterations in the typology of the writing system itself, with or without concomitant alterations of individual members of the system. Furthermore, adaptation to a new writing medium may give rise to a conscious script reform, or may influence development over time. Let me give some examples.

Differences in the design of letter or character shapes:
the adoption of a system of simplified characters in Chinese; the adoption of 'regularised' letters to eliminate ambiguity in Thai or Singhalese; the reduction of ligatures within the Malayalam syllabary.

Alternatives to existing characters of letters:
the numerous promulgations of the Language Commissions for the writing of Japanese.

Fundamental alterations in the typology of the writing system:
the suggested reforms for the Tamil writing system.

Adaptations to a new writing medium:
the change from writing on bark, leaf or stone to writing on paper; the change from handwriting to the woodblock printing press, movable type, the typewriter and the computer screen.

For the present, I shall deal with just two of these cases, that of Japanese and that of Tamil.

Script reform in Japanese

It might be useful to situate the development of the Japanese writing system historically, before embarking on a discussion of modern reforms. The Japanese, had no writing system of their own before they came into contact with the Chinese, and at a very early stage in Sino-Japanese relations (c. 400 B.C.), they borrowed the Chinese writing system. It is believed that initially the Chinese script was used in Japan only for writing Chinese. Japanese proper names were represented in early texts by Chinese characters (known in Japanese as *kanji*) used for their sound value. From about 700 A.D. onwards, continuous pieces of Japanese text are found written in kanji. The prestige of written Japanese was, however, low, and it was commoner for texts to be written in Chinese, but when read aloud, read in Japanese with the reader extracting the meaning from the Chinese text, rearranging the characters mentally and adding incremental suffixes where necessary, to form correct Japanese sentences. From about 800, we find texts with kanji added for their sound value as mnemonics to readers reading the texts in Japanese. Such kanji were at first written in their full form as Chinese characters, but gradually they became abbreviated. These abbreviated forms, either "cursive" or "isolating" (so called because they isolated just one part of the parent character, but not necessarily the radical), were the forerunners of the modern Japanese hiragana and katagana syllabaries. An example of a cursive kana is from ; an example of an isolating kana is from . The normal orthography of modern Japanese is a combination of kanji and kana, with numerals represented by the Arabic figures in the Roman script.

The hiragana syllabary, developed from the cursive forms of Chinese characters, is used for inflectional endings, grammatical function words etc. as well as some lexical content words; it is also used for whole-text representation in some children's literature. The katakana syllabary, developed from abbreviated parts of Chinese characters, is used for writing

loanwords other than those of Chinese origin, and for other specific purposes such as for telegrams. The Japanese writing system is probably unique in its formalised retention of this plurality of scripts. The system allows for stylistic variation in different genres, and this is, apparently, widely exploited but has not been the subject of general study.

An interesting phenomenon is the practice of using two scripts together, one to gloss the other. Often proper names on visiting cards are printed in kanji, but are accompanied by hiragana glosses where the kanji used are unfamiliar or rare in Japanese usage. An example is the following, where 林 樹(Linju, in Japanese) is glossed by りんじゅ (Figure 1).

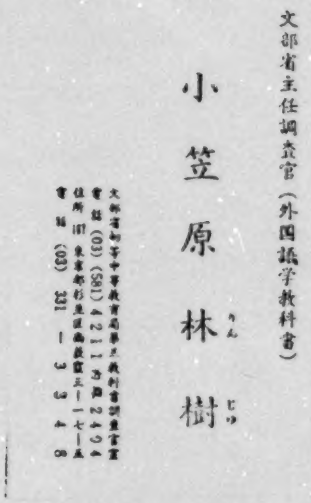

Figure 1: Example of a Japanese visiting card.

> One hesitates for an epithet to describe a system of writing which is so complex that it needs the aid of another system to explain it.
> (Sansom, 1928:44)

Inevitably, one may suppose, there have been many calls for reform of the Japanese writing system as a whole. In outlining the kinds of reforms proposed, I draw heavily on Seeley, 1984. Prior to 1900, three types of reform were proposed at various times. Some reformers wanted to replace kanji altogether by kana; others proposed the replacement of kanji and kana

by the Roman script; yet others wanted to retain the existing system, but restrict the number of kanji used. Because of the plurality of scripts in Japanese, all so-called reforms are, in effect, replacements, but with the exception of the romanisation proposal, are replacements within one overall system. This situation is, in itself, unique.

It may appear that *prima facie* any attempt at reform within the system should be one which aimed at a reduction in the cumbersome learning load, particularly of kanji; that is, a reform should aim at some measure of simplification. However, simplification may be superficial, and may conceal or create underlying difficulties. In 1900, the Ministry of Education issued a series of regulations aimed at simplifying the teaching of written Japanese at primary level. The regulations involved the setting up of a limited number of standardised kana; restricting the number of kanji taught in primary schools to some 1,200; and changing the complex historical system of kana usage for Sino-Japanese items to one based on pronunciation. The modifications to kana usage meant that writing kana was greatly simplified at primary level. It meant, for instance, that /o:/ was now written in one way in all cases instead of the previous eight different ways. But this new kana usage related only to the writing of Sino-Japanese. Native Japanese words and elements continued to be written in the old way. This created a problem for primary school children, who were unable to appreciate the differences. A further problem was that the new kana usage was confined to the primary level. Sino-Japanese words were written in the old way from junior high school upwards. Thus, there was created a lack of consistency in the way the same words were written by different groups within society. The Ministry of Education decided to look again into the question of kana usage.

Meanwhile, a movement opposing the new kana usage grew up, with people arguing

> that the historical kana usage represented the essential form of the Japanese language and so should be preserved in perpetuity.
> (Seeley, 1984:268)

As a result of the controversy, the Ministry rescinded the regulations in 1908. This victory for traditionalism was, in the opinion of many, a Pyrrhic one. Many still held the view that some form of script simplification would help to reduce the length of time needed to complete an education in Japan, which, at that period, was two or three years longer than in European countries. Rightly or wrongly, the complexity of the script was identified by a section of public opinion as the cause of this.

Newspapers, from early on, had traditionally been printed with a large number of kanji, and they were therefore accessible only to an élite. During the first two decades of this century, the voice of democratisation made itself heard in Japan, and in 1923, all the major newspapers agreed on a reduction in the number of kanji to be used, a standardisation of kana usage, coupled with the adoption of a colloquial written style. The agreement was that on 1st September, 1923, all the major newspapers would adopt the reforms together. 1st September, 1923 was the day of the Great Kanto Earthquake, and the chaos and distruption caused by it prevented the reforms coming into effect as planned. Never again were the newspapers able to come to a general agreement, because political considerations intervened. The Manchuria Incident of 1931 meant that newspapers needed to preserve the usage of a large number of kanji to reproduce Chinese personal and place names. The mood of conservatism and nationalism following the events of 1931 militated significantly against reform. For example, a proposal to abolish kanji put forward by the Minister of Education was thrown out by the Japanese Parliament on the grounds that Imperial commands would have to be rewritten, and that would be disrespectful to the Emperor.

> ... a thorough-going reform of the Japanese writing system was not carried out in the first part of the 20th century, despite calls and proposals from various quarters. As a result of this failure to reform, Japan was left heir to an intricate and complex writing system which, though it shewed respect for historical principles, often did so only at the expense of clarity of meaning ...
> (Seeley, 1984:273)

Seeley quotes the case of the Japanese army during the 1930s, which found itself obliged to recruit soldiers of a lower and lower educational standard, to the point where some of them were unable to read the kanji used to write the names of weapons and other military terms. This was, apparently, the cause of a number of accidents involving weapons. In 1940, the Army Ministry issued a directive restricting the number of kanji for weapon names and terms to 1,235. In 1941, a further directive ordered that a pronunciation- based kana usage be adopted instead of the kanji. In 1942, a national list of approved kanji for use in schools was approved, with 1,134 of high frequency, 1,320 of low frequency and 74 special kanji, such as 朕 ("imperial we") used in the Constitution and other imperial documents. School pupils were to be taugnt to read and write the 1,134 high frequency kanji; for the others, a passive knowledge only was required. Certain emendations were made to this list, but it was not until after the war that a major review of the Japanese writing system was undertaken.

> The first postwar meeting of the Deliberative Council was held in November 1945, and at this meeting the then Education Minister emphasized that the solution of problems relating to the Japanese language and script lay at the basis of all the other reforms which were necessary for the rebuilding of Japan.
> (Seeley, 1984:273)

Whilst the American language advisers to the Allied High Command recommended, somewhat predictably, the eventual romanisation of Japanese, the Japanese themselves set about a reduction in the number of kanji for general use, and in 1946, a new list of 1,850 was proposed. Seeley notes:

> The ... list and modern kana usage together represent a major simplification to the Japanese script compared with before the War, but ... both are in fact based on earlier proposals ... Thus, although various of the earlier attempts at script reform had been rejected at the time, they did provide a basis for the reforms of 1946.
> (Seeley, 1984:274)

The new list was adopted for general use in newspapers, magazines, official publications and school textbooks almost immediately. But in spite of the fact that reading and writing Japanese were greatly simplified, it was still found that it was not possible to teach school pupils satisfactorily to read and write all the listed kanji within the nine years of compulsory education, and a restricted list "for current use" had to be compiled.

During the 1950s and 1960s, other areas of the Japanese writing system came under scrutiny, including the use of kanji for proper names and the use of kana for inflectional endings. The 1970s witnessed further debate on the kanji list, and after considerable research, in 1979 a new kanji list was proposed, based on language changes and the experience of government departments, public bodies, publishing houses and the like. The list was modified in 1981 to include 1,945 kanji, as a result of continued seeking of public reactions to the lists.

The slight increase in the number of "approved" kanji in the guidelines seems to go against the regular tide towards simplification, but, as Seeley notes, it is the result of considerable compromise both between the views of the Japanese people in general to the kanji list and between the different groups which compiled the list. By simplification, of course, is meant a reduction in the number of kanji. No proposals suggest a simplification of the kanji themselves. This there has been a trend towards a greater and greater reliance on the syllabaries, used for their sound values, with very common kanji being retained for certain items. Whilst it may be supposed that individual kanji impose a greater learning load than syllabic elements, there is some evidence to suggest that this is not necessarily so. Some research has suggested that kanji, when presented with meaning, can be learned more quickly than kana with only a sound value.

> ... results are found for Japanese nursery school children where complex Chinese characters representing words, e.g., 海 (*umi*: sea) and 買 (*kau*: buy) were ... much faster to learn than less complex *kana* symbols such as い (/i/ as in *meet*) and へ (/he/ as in *hello*), which represent syllables which are largely without meaning. ... In an intertesting variation of these basic experiments, a different group of children was presented the same written items but the speech names were reversed with the letters or syllables. Thus, for example, ... the Chinese character 海 was called "he" (no meaning) and the kana へ was called "umi" (sea) ... The results ... were similar, the writing form which was called by a word speech name was learned twice as fast as that called by a ... syllable speech name. These findings demonstrate that the type of writing script and its degree of complexity play only a minor role in learning. Rather, what is important is what is presented along with the script. If what is presented is something meaningful, like a speech word, the item will be learned quickly. If it is not meaningful, like the name of a letter or syllable, the item will be learned slowly.
> (Steinberg & Harper, in Coulmas & Ehlich, 1983:333)

These claims may be much too general to make on this series of experiments (which were replicates of experiments of alphabetical vs word learning in English). However, they do demonstrate that there is a considerable field of research in the area of the learning of different scripts to be undertaken, and the folk impressions that characters or kanji are automatically "harder" to learn than a sound-based system, impressions upon which the whole of the Japanese script reform proposals have been made over a period of at least two hundred years, may not be those which give the most significant or relevant information on the subject.

Script reform in Tamil

The proposals for the reform of the Tamil script present in some respects certain similarities with the Japanese situation, but in other respects they are quite different.

The Tamil script developed from the Brahmi writing system known to have flourished in northern India during the 3rd century B.C. Extant examples of Tamil are available from the 2nd century A.D., and the Tamil script has the longest recorded history of all the Dravidian derivatives of Brahmi. The Tamil script is syllabic, but the construction of the syllable graphs is different from that of the Japanese kana. Whilst the majority of the kana are

individual, graphically unrelated, representations of syllables, the Tamil syllabary is built up in a systematic way. Each syllable consists of a consonantal element and a vocal element, and these are compounded or conjoined according to fixed regular rules. For example:

<i> இ (in isolation) ி (in compounds)

<p> ப் <m> ம் <l> ல் <t> த் <s> ச்

<pi> பி <mi> மி லி <ti> தி <si> சி

This regularity does not permeate the whole of the system, however, and it is essentially the irregularities that have been the targets for modern reformers. There are two major sources of irregularity within the system. The first is the fact that some compound forms have variants, e.g.,

<u> உ (in isolation) ு or ூ or ு or ூ (in compounds)

<mu> மு <tu> து <su> சு <hu> னூ

Why not, say the proponents of reform, aim for a uniformity of symbolism, a regularisation of the system?

The second irregularity concerns the positioning of vowels in relation to consonants. ி <i>, as we have seen is attached to consonant signs in a compound relationship. ா <a:>, however, is conjoined with consonant signs to form a single syllable, e.g.,

<pa:> பா <ma:> மா <la:> லா <ta:> தா <sa:> சா

Whilst the structure of this formation appears superficially alphabetic in that a vowel symbol follows a consonant symbol, as in the basic pattern of

the Roman script, within the Tamil system the whole conjunct is treated as one element. ா is not, then considered as a *letter* but rather as an integral part of the preceding consonant symbol. In vertical signwriting, for example, ா cannot occur beneath its consonant. In crosswords, the consonant and vowel symbols must occur in one square.

One problem with the <a:> is that there is a variant form of ா which is ◌ா, identical to the variant form of <u> which we have already seen. There is no overlap in writing, as those consonants which take the ◌ா variant of <a:> do not occur with the ◌ variant of <u>, but there is obviously a potential source of learning difficulty here which could be avoided through some degree of regularisation.

In addition, Tamil shares with most of the syllabaries in use in the Indian sub-continent, the phenomenon of sound and symbol ordering being reversed. Whereas the vowel conjunct ா occurs regularly *after* the consonant sign with which it constitutes a syllable, there are other vowel conjuncts, notably ெ and ை which regularly occur *before* the consonants with which they form syllables, e.g.,

<e> ெ

<pe> பெ <me> மெ <le> லெ

One of the vowel conjuncts which behaves like this, ை<ai> has also a variant form with some consonants, viz.,

<lai> லை <nai> நை <ṉai> �னை <ḷai> ளை

When the vowels whose conjunct symbols occur before consonants are lengthened, the sign of lengthening occurs *after* the consonant symbol, to

form a graphological triptych, e.g.,

<o:> ஓ (in isolation) ெ.....ா (discontinuous conjunct)

<po:> ெபா <mo:> ெமா <lo:> ெலா

The Tamil writing system has undergone very little developmental change since the sixteenth century. It has, on the other hand, been subject to a series of deliberate major reforms, principally those instituted by Joseph Beschi (1680-1747), an Italian Jesuit who spent 37 years of his missionary life in southern India. But even these reforms were slow in taking root: whilst missionary printing houses adopted them gradually, it is evident that manuscript writing lagged consistently behind, and that the reformed and unreformed systems co-existed for quite a long period. In 1817, for example, one commentator wrote:

> The Hindu writing is not exempt from the great inconvenience which attends our old manuscripts, by the absence of points and marks, as well as of the separation between words and sentences. Besides their orthography is so extraordinary and complicated, in some dialects, that the best reader cannot decypher what he has before him without hesitation, and without close attention to the subject, especially when it is not set down according to the rigorous grammatical principles, which the greater number are ignorant of or neglect. This difficulty is most severely experienced in the Tamil language.
> (Dubois, 1817:282 in James, 1984:109)

When Beschi first arrived in India, Tamil writing had no formal system of punctuation, no capitalisation, no separation of words or sentences and no differentiation between long and short vowels or between closed or open syllables. In ancient times, certain of these distinctions did exist, but they had fallen into desuetude, principally because they involved the use of dots or lines above the consonant or vowel signs. As the practice of writing on palm leaves with iron styluses grew up, the convention of using dots or lines disappeared, as it entailed puncturing the grain of the leaf causing perforation and consequent weakening of the structure of the surface. The dots existed in the scribes' minds, but the exigencies of the medium

prevented their physical expression.

In addition to the use of European conventions of punctuation and word spacing, Beschi's reforms were to change the shape of the vowel conjuncts, introducing a new shape to represent the long vowels and making the distinction of long and short vowels quite patent; and to reintroduce the generalised use of a dot placed over a consonant to represent a closed syllable or a geminate. The new conjunct (ெ) conformed in structure to the Tamil "type" of character. The rapid adoption of this reform testifies to its ingenuity, practicality and suitability for the Tamil writing system. It did not evidently seem opportune to Beschi to alter the ordering of the vowel positions, although he recognised the claim of "superiority" for the Roman convention.

> The Tamilians do not, after the excellent plan of Europeans, place the vowel after the consonants to form syllables, but of the consonant and vowel united they form a third figure.
> (Beschi, 1739:8, in James, 1984:111)

The reforms Beschi instituted were enough to gain acceptance amongst the Tamils, without modifying the genius of their historic script. (A similar reasoning probably underlies the Japanese insistence on retaining a large number of kanji rather than total replacement by kana. Jian (1957, in James, 1984:113) on the subject of character simplification in Chinese notes:

> The written language ... is one of the characteristics of a country. .... it is possible to simplify, but we cannot break with historical tradition.)

Realising that as a missionary in a potentially hostile land, he had to be circumspect in his approach, Beschi endeavoured to make only those changes which were essential, sacrificing other important changes in the name of compromise and moderation. Any attempt on his part to tamper further with the construction of the Tamil script would no doubt have met with resistance

and might have been interpreted as proselytising through interfering with the psyche of the Tamils via their script. (No less strong are the feelings of the Tamils to this day: within India, they resent and resist the imposition of Hindi from the north; within Sri Lanka, the perceived imposition of Singhala from the south has had tragic consequences.)

Beschi's reforms were, however, necessary for two reasons. The first was that the homography was a source of great confusion and the second was the introduction of the printing press to India, a phenomenon with which all indigenous scripts had to come to terms. The development of printing, the introduction of paper to India, the need for rapid propagation of Bibles and other missionary materials as well as grammars of the local languages, the European literary tradition manifest in the educational background of the missionaries themselves - all played their part in the development and regularisation of the Tamil writing system. But in spite of the education of the early missionaries, they did not attempt to impose the alleged superiority of the Roman, or other, alphabetic system over the Tamil syllabary. Beschi took the Tamil system on its own terms and incorporated improvements within it, reconciling the historical inheritance of Tamil writing conventions with creativity and ingenuity. To distinguish between what is simple and what is intelligible depends on the conception of the simplicity of the alphabetic system not as the *only* form of intelligibility, but as one form, by no means exclusive, within the plurality of scripts developed by man. The starting point for the study - and reform - of any script should be that script itself, its historical and cultural traditions and its conventions, without consideration of the supposed superiority or inferiority of the system with respect to any other. The enlightenment and rationality that we experience in the attitude of such eighteenth-century figures as Beschi, are not echoed during the present day.

There has been a considerable lobby for further reform of the Tamil writing system, especially this century. The reform proposals have often been based on the spurious notion of the supposed superiority of the alphabetic system over the syllabic. In such arguments, appeals are made to the 'logicality' of the system.

> Common sense will tell that a vowel-consonant combination must have only two symbols, one for the consonant and the other for the vowel. Also the consonant part should come first followed by that of the vowel.
> (Mahadevan, 1980:518 in James, 1984:118)

The Tamil syllabary could easily be altered into an exclusively alphabetic system, since as it stands it is no less analytic than an alphabetic script. An example of this is given by Mahadevan (1980:514-515, in James, 1984:119):

> It would have been really a paradise, if our fore-fathers had only followed the principle of using undeformed consonants and vowel scripts to represent the so-called vowel-consonant combinations and written the word முருகன் as ம உ ர உ க ன் as we continue to do even to-day in English MURUGAN.

The rather disparaging tone ("undeformed consonants") reveals the author's implicit contention that a syllabic system is somehow inferior to the alphabetic. He goes on (ibid.):

> Unfortunately in their anxiety to minimise the difficulties they experienced while writing on the narrow space of the palmyra leaf with the crude iron nail, they had developed separate cumbersome characters deforming the consonant and vowel forms to appear as a single script. But none of us to-day takes the pain of holding an iron nail to write on a palmyra leaf. Science has given in our hand well developed fountain pens and papers of good quality with soft polished surface. So, the inevitability of using the so-called vowel-consonant deformed consonants is not there.

Whilst it is no doubt true that the scripts of southern India did adapt themselves to being written on palm leaves, it is certainly quite inaccurate to attribute the source of the syllabic nature of the writing system to this. If, as Mahadevan asserts, the earliest writers of Tamil had wanted to "minimise the difficulties they experienced" and had evolved a syllabic system, the implication must be that their original intention had been to write an alphabetic system. There is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that

this might have been the case. To claim the inevitability of the syllabic system as a result of the convention of writing on palm leaves is patent nonsense. The fact is, however, that such opinions as exemplified by Mahadevan exist and are propagated through serious academic publication; as such, they represent a section of articulate, if misguided, thought which those ultimately responsible for the decisions which make for reform ignore at their peril. Mahadevan (ibid.) goes even further, appealing to the occult (ever guaranteed a sympathetic ear in India!):

> How our deformed scripts remain unsuitable for taking any technical adventures can clearly be seen by contacting people, who are said to be contacting and receiving message from the souls of the past generation. .... They said the necessary permutations and combinations of the sounds to produce mechanically the words, clothing the ideas of the divine message is possible only with the Roman script. ... It will be clearly seen that what is true with the divine 'puja board' is equally true with the scientific typewriter and printing devices.

Given the antiquity of syllabic scripts in India, it does seem implausible that the format of the puja board should depend on an alphabetic system for its effectiveness. Cause and effect have become dissociated and conclusions drawn on false premises.

A major argument against the introduction of an alphabetic notation using the existing symbols of Tamil is that this would render many words extremely unwieldy in terms of length. Tamil is a highly inflecting language with a good deal of agglutination, with affixes piled one upon the other both at the beginnings and endings of words. The very essence of the language does not lend itself ideally to an alphabetic system.

> The assumption that syllabaries are more primitive than alphabets seems not unconnected with the historical fact that the Greek alphabet developed from a type of writing-system which some have termed syllabic. But it is surely inappropriate to speak in the abstract, as many Western surveys of writing-systems do, of the inferiority of syllabaries to alphabets, since it is only with reference to a particular language that one can assess the relative merits of an alphabetic and a syllabic type of writing system. (French, 1971 (1976:118-119) in James, 1984:123)

Many suggestions for reform have been put forward for Tamil, most of which

have been motivated from the alphabetic system. This type of reform is fundamentally different from the suggestions we have discussed for Japanese, since the Tamil proposals modify not the symbol shapes themselves but the very system in which they have developed. Some suggestions for reform which have been cited in the literature are of a much greater degree of complexity than the existing system, but have been put forward in order to ensure a regularity where at present there is inconsistency of convention. Regularity evidently does not mean simplicity; and reform does not necessarily aim at simplicity.

Certain inconsistencies, such as those I have mentioned concerning the vowels <a:> and <ai> could be ironed out without too much trouble. However, even these seemingly straightforward alterations in the script have been the subject of over a century of debate, and the political controversies which they have engendered have far outweighed the significance of the reforms themselves. Individual politicians and, indeed, whole political parties, in Tamil Nadu in India have staked their reputations on taking one or other side in the script reform proposals. Government script committees have come and gone, but it was not until 1978 that the reform of the irregularities in the vowels <a:> and <ai> was finally promulgated. It may very well be true that a regularisation of parts of the script conventions will enable the writing system to be a more effective tool for comunication, and could be learned better than at present. However, the promulgation of a script reform does not entail its immediate universal adoption. The political implications of the 1978 reform are great. Many have refused to adopt the reforms. The Tamils are happy with their script: it is a distinctive script, with a considerable pedigree and used for no other language in the world. Radical surgery may be considered functionally and idealistically desirable, but practically untenable. At the moment, both the reformed and unreformed systems exist side by side, with reformed and unreformed symbols being found even on the

same page of print. Most popular dailes use the unreformed script throughout their pages. In its attempt to regularise the script, the government created a double standard: the reformed script ostensibly making learning and reading easier, is still very much the plaything of the educated élite; the literate of less education appear content with the script system they have inherited. Regularity for regularity's sake is probably unnecessary.

> Where systems of writing become identified (as often happens) with unreasoning and unreasonable political, national or religious passions, there is little that the linguist could or should do. Nor is it profitable in all cases to make concessions to naïve linguistic prejudice, traditionalism or ... its reverse; there are factors in the social situation however which merit the linguist's attention and for which he should be prepared to condition his science to circumstances and seek a compromise.
> (Berry, 1958 (1972:738) in James, 1984:112)

When, in an educational environment one is forced on a daily basis to make continual concessions to ignorance, inexperience, prejudice and traditionalism; when, with the best will in the world, one can compromise one's reputation and training no longer and can no more defend, with sincerity, decisions and actions from the position of cabinet responsibility, then it is, indeed, time one left, while there is still some good grace to go with.

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